

Message Text

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TAGS: PFOR, MARR, ET, US

SUBJECT: EDITORIAL ON KAGNEW

UNDER HEADING QTE OUR BASE IN ETHIOPIA UNQTE, FOLLOWING
EDITORIAL APPEARED IN BALTIMORE SUN JUNE 29:

QTE MILITARY BASES ESTABLISHED IN DISTANT LANDS OFTEN INVOLVE US IN SITUATIONS IN WHICH WE HAVE NO BUSINESS. THIS HAS BEEN SHOWN TO THE NATION'S HORROR AND CHASTENING IN THE JUNGLES OF INDOCHINA, AND IT HAS LED TO A MUCH-NEEDED EXAMINATION OF THE HUNDREDS OF COSTLY MILITARY INSTALLATIONS WE HAVE SCATTERED AROUND THE GLOBE. IF THERE ARE OTHER LESSONS TO BE LEARNED, THEY SHOULD INCLUDE A REALIZATION THAT SOME OVERSEAS BASES ARE JUSTIFIED IN TERMS OF OUR OWN NATIONAL INTERESTS (NATO IS A PRIME EXAMPLE) AND SOME ARE NOT. THE KAGNEW COMMUNICATION CENTER NEAR ASMARA, THE
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CAPITAL OF THE ETHIOPIAN PROVINCE OF ERITREA, IS A CLASSIC

INSTANCE OF THE LATTER.

MORE THAN THREE DECADES AGO, IN THE MIDST OF WORLD WAR II, THE UNITED STATES ACQUIRED THIS BASE FROM BRITISH FORCES WHICH HAD CAPTURED ERITREA AND HAD THUS ENDED MORE THAN 80 YEARS OF ITALIAN COLONIAL RULE. POSITIONED IDEALLY ATOP

A HIGH PLATEAU, KAGNEW WAS AT ONCE A LINK IN THE U.S. WORLD COMMUNICATION NETWORK AND A MONITOR ON SHIP MOVEMENT AND RADIO CHATTER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE HORN OF AFRICA. WHEN ETHIOPIA GAINED CONTROL OF ERITREA IN 1952, RENEWING A SUZERAINTY THAT HAD OBTAINED SPORADICALLY THROUGH THE CENTURIES, EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE NEGOTIATED A 25-YEAR LEASE ON KAGNEW THAT IS TO EXPIRE IN 1978.

TWO DECADES AGO, THE ARRANGEMENTS SEEMED SUPERB TO BOTH SIDES. U.S. MILITARY AUTHORITIES CONSIDERED KAGNEW AN IMPORTANT INSTALLATION IN TRYING TO CURB SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE RED SEA AREA. FOR THE ETHIOPIANS, THE STARS AND STRIPES FLYING NEAR ASMARA WAS A SYMBOL OF A U.S. UNDERTAKING THAT OVER THE YEARS WAS TO POUR HALF A BILLION DOLLARS INTO THE BUILDUP OF A 40,000-MAN ARMY, THE SECOND LARGEST IN BLACK AFRICA.

SEVERAL FACTORS HAVE INTERVENED, HOWEVER, THAT MAKE KAGNEW LESS THAN AN IDEAL SITUATION FROM THE U.S. POINT OF VIEW. TECHNOLOGICALLY, COMMUNICATIONS SATELLITES AND THE NEW U.S. FACILITY AT DIEGO GARCIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN HAVE MADE THE STATION SOMEWHAT OBSOLETE. IN U.S. DOMESTIC POLITICS, THE COSTLY MAINTENANCE OF OVERSEAS BASES HAS BECOME HIGHLY UNPOPULAR. AND IN ETHIOPIA ITSELF, THE U.S. HAS FOUND ITSELF OBLIQUELY INVOLVED IN A CONFLICT BETWEEN SELASSIE'S GOVERNMENT AND ERITREAN SEPARATISTS THAT IS COSTING ABOUT 300 LIVES A YEAR, INCLUDING PERSONS KILLED BY U.S.-MADE BOMBS DROPPED BY U.S.-TRAINED ETHIOPIAN PILOTS FROM U.S.-MANUFACTURED AIRCRAFT.

TOM HORTON OF THE SUN REPORTED FROM ASMARA THIS WEEK THAT THE U.S. ARMY IS GLADLY GIVING UP ITS RESPONSIBILITY FOR KAGNEW AND IS TURNING IT OVER TO A RELUCTANT U.S. NAVY, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WHICH WOULD LIKE TO GET OUT, TOO. BUT OUR FLAG STILL FLIES AT KAGNEW BECAUSE WASHINGTON IS FEARFUL OF THE QTE POTENTIALLY DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS A CLOSURE COULD HAVE ON THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT, THE UNITED STATES'S MAIN PARTNER IN AFRICA. UNQTE. THIS IS INSUFFICIENT JUSTIFICATION. WISDOM WOULD SUGGEST THAT THE UNITED STATES GET OUT OF KAGNEW AS PROMPTLY AS POSSIBLE WHILE STILL FULFILLING OTHER OBLIGATIONS TO ETHIOPIA THAT ARE CLEARLY IN OUR

NATIONAL INTEREST. UNQTE. ROGERS

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